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ABSTRACT

During the 1997-98 academic year, members of the Germanna Community College (Virginia) English faculty observed that students were having difficulty with reading comprehension in the content areas. Faculty conducted an informal survey of Virginia Community College System colleagues, and learned that the placement test cutoff scores used at Germanna for placement into developmental reading were significantly lower than at other colleges. On the basis of this information, cutoff scores for placement into developmental ENG 04 "Reading Improvement I" were raised beginning 1998-99, and a new placement level for "co-curricular" enrollment in ENG 06 "Reading in the Content Areas" was instituted. As a result, cutoff scores for "unrestricted" course placement were raised substantially. As a result of these changes, the overall proportion of students recommended for developmental English increased during 1998-99 and 1999-2000 from 12-15% to 25-30%. Enrollment in developmental reading courses for the last two academic years increased correspondingly from only 37 students in 1997-98 to 158 students during 1999-2000. The report concludes that the changes in reading placement appear to correspond to different levels of performance in college-level courses. Enrollment in ENG 06 appears to raise the average grades earned by students recommended for that course, while enrollment in ENG 04 does not produce a corresponding increase. (VWC)

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John W. Curtis

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Germanna Community College

Developmental Reading Placement and Course Outcomes, 1990-91 through 1999-2000

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July 19, 2000

During the 1997-98 academic year, members of the Germanna English faculty observed that students were having difficulty with reading comprehension in the content areas. Faculty also conducted an informal survey of VCCS colleagues, and learned that the placement test (Compass) cutoff scores used at Germanna for placement into developmental reading were significantly lower than at other colleges. On the basis of this information, cutoff scores for placement into developmental ENG 04 "Reading Improvement I" were raised beginning with AY 1998-99, and a new placement level for "co-curricular" enrollment in ENG 06 "Reading in the Content Areas" was instituted. As a result, the cutoff scores for "unrestricted" course placement were raised substantially. Beginning with Spring 2000, there was also an attempt to combine placement recommendations utilizing both reading and writing test scores. Students had the opportunity to enroll in ENG 07 "Writing and Reading Improvement I," a course which combined both reading and writing skills. ENG 07 was intended for students who "just missed" the writing cutoff for ENG 111 and an unrestricted reading placement.

As a result of these changes, the overall proportion of students recommended for developmental English increased during 1998-99 and 1999-2000 from 12-15% to 25-30% (See Table 1, which is based on curriculum-placed students only). Specifically with regard to reading, the number of new curriculum-placed students recommended for placement in developmental reading increased from 4% in 1997-98 to 26% in 1999-2000. (Note that approximately 25% of new students did not have any reading placement scores on file throughout the period.)

Enrollment in developmental reading courses for the last two academic years increased correspondingly (see Table 2), from only 37 students in 1997-98 to 158 students during 1999-2000. However, Table 1 indicates that there is an apparent problem in follow-through with developmental enrollment. While the number of students who enrolled in developmental reading increased fivefold over the last two academic years, as a proportion of students *recommended* for developmental reading the figure actually declined. The decline in developmental reading enrollment began as early as 1994-95. During that year fewer students were recommended for

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developmental reading, but even among that reduced group the proportion actually enrolling in the developmental reading course—only ENG 04 was offered at the time—declined. At that point, the proportion of recommended students enrolling in developmental reading dropped from 53% to 21%, and the proportion has remained generally below 30% ever since. (This compares with 61% enrolling among the students who entered Germanna in 1990-91.)

One explanation for the low level of compliance with the developmental reading recommendation may lie in the nature of that recommendation itself. In writing or math, the student is either cleared to take a specific college-level course, or is recommended for the corresponding developmental course. For reading, however, the link with a specific college-level course is not as direct. Students are expected to demonstrate college-level reading skills in order to enroll in just about any college-level course—the list of courses which do not require college-level reading consists primarily of computer literacy courses, physical education activities, and student development courses. As a consequence, it is not always as readily evident whether a student "needs" a certain reading placement level in order to enroll in a particular course. Further, as noted above, even among curriculum-placed students, nearly one-fourth do not have reading placement test scores on file.

It is apparent that, if the reading placement recommendations are to have full effect, the process for advising students with regard to basic reading skills needs to change. However, in order to make such a change more meaningful, it would be useful to know whether there is any concrete evidence that the recommended developmental reading courses will produce a positive outcome in terms of success in college-level courses. Table 3 provides some evidence in this regard.

Table 3 is divided into two major sections, reflecting the substantial change in reading placement which began with AY 1998-99. Prior to the reorganization of reading placement, results in the table seem to indicate a generally successful placement of students: Students whose course placement was "unrestricted" due to satisfactory reading placement test scores earned grades equivalent to those for students overall—although it must be noted that the "unrestricted" students formed the bulk of all students in the analysis, and therefore had a strong effect on the overall mean GPA outcomes. Students without reading test scores earned grades above the overall average. Many of these students probably presented other evidence which would indicate that they were prepared for college-level courses; in a practical sense, they were treated as

"unrestricted" in their course selection based on reading ability, and this appears to have been appropriate overall. Students from the earlier period who were recommended for ENG 04 showed lower average grades overall than the two categories previously mentioned. Students who actually completed ENG 04 earned higher grades in their other courses than did those students who enrolled in the developmental course but did not complete it. However, the grades earned by these students were still lower, on average, than those earned by all students—especially in math, natural science, and occupational/technical disciplines. This outcome would indicate that the ENG 04 course did not necessarily give students all the preparation they needed to be successful in those courses. Further, students who were recommended for ENG 04 but did not enroll in the course earned average grades which were only slightly lower than those of the students who completed the developmental course. Overall, the effect of completing ENG 04 prior to 1998-99 did not seem as strong as might be desired.

Results for students entering Germanna during the two academic years following the reading placement changes are mixed. Students recommended for ENG 04 who completed that course earned higher grades than the few students who did not complete the course, with one exception. However, the grades earned by ENG 04 completers were significantly lower than overall average grades, and were also significantly lower than the grades earned by students recommended for ENG 04 who did not even attempt that course. Further, the number of students who completed ENG 04 and then went on to earn grades in other courses is surprisingly small. Many more of the entering students were recommended for ENG 06, and their results are somewhat more encouraging. Students recommended for ENG 06 who completed that course (or completed ENG 07) achieved grades which were only slightly lower than the mean for all curriculum-placed students. The average grades of these students were substantially higher than those of recommended students who did not complete the developmental course, although only slightly higher than the grades of those recommended students who did not enroll in the developmental course.

The results presented in Table 3 do not seem to indicate a strong positive impact of enrollment in developmental reading courses on grade outcomes in content areas. Put another way, students who ignore the developmental reading placement recommendation do not seem to pay much of a penalty, in terms of grades, compared with students who follow that recommendation. However, Table 3 does not necessarily provide specific information to evaluate

the effect of the change in placement test score cutoffs. What were the outcomes for students whose placement recommendation would have been different under the new process?

Table 4 presents some of these "special cases," and offers an opportunity to examine the direct impact of the changes in reading placement test cutoff scores. To begin with, the minimum score to place a student into developmental reading (ENG 04) was raised for 1998-99. Theoretically, students who score below this threshold should not be prepared for college-level coursework. Table 4 presents results for 13 students from the earlier period who fell into this category. Of these, four went on to complete ENG 04 (as recommended) and earned substantially higher grades than the nine who did not. For these students, at the lower end of the test score range, ignoring the developmental placement recommendation led to a substantial "penalty" in terms of the grades they received.

There are two other categories of students from the earlier period whose placement recommendation would have been different beginning in 1998-99. These are students whose course choices were previously "unrestricted," but who would have received a developmental reading recommendation after 1998-99. There were 93 students whose revised placement would have been into ENG 04; of these, only five had enrolled in a developmental reading course on their own initiative. For those five students, the ENG 04 course did not produce higher grades. However, this group of 93 students as a whole earned lower average grades than did the other "unrestricted" students, and lower than the average for all students in the earlier period. An additional 1,097 students entering before 1998-99 would have been recommended for the ENG 06 course, had it been available. Again, only seven students from this group took the initiative to enroll in a developmental reading course, and those five who completed the course earned higher average grades as a result. In this case, had the student enrolled in a developmental reading course, there is some evidence that their grades would have been higher as a result.

Conclusion

The changes in reading placement which took effect in 1998-99 do appear to correspond to different levels of performance in college-level courses. Because the majority of students recommended for developmental courses do not enroll in those courses, the number of cases for analysis of the new cutoff levels is limited. This has especially been a problem in developmental reading courses. However, based on the data available to this point, enrollment in ENG 06 (or

ENG 07) appears to raise the average grades earned by students recommended for that course, while enrollment in ENG 04 does not produce a corresponding increase.

A Caveat

This report has attempted to specify the impact of developmental reading courses on student learning outcomes. However, there are several shortcomings to the quantitative approach used here:

- The outcomes measured here are grades in courses in various disciplines. Reading skill is only one of several factors contributing to student success in those courses, but those other factors are not included here.
- In addition, the outcome measures are grade averages for aggregates of large numbers of students taking blocks of courses. Reading skill may have more significance in some courses than others. Further, the larger the number of students and courses contained in a mean GPA, the greater the tendency for that measure to resemble the overall college average.
- The essential comparison utilized here is in terms of course outcomes for students who followed their placement recommendation, contrasted with those who did not. However, students who did not follow the placement recommendation may have had entirely valid reasons for their choice, and may even have been especially motivated to succeed as a result of that choice. Similarly, students who followed the placement recommendation—and even those who successfully completed the developmental course—may have varying degrees of success in further courses, for reasons unrelated to their reading skills. This effect is not included in the analysis.

Despite these shortcomings, the analysis provided here can serve as a stimulus for further discussion of the issues surrounding reading skill and learning outcomes, and for more focused analysis.

Table 1.
Students recommended for and enrolling
in developmental English coursework, 1990-91 through 1999-2000
(Curriculum-placed students only)

		Developmental English Overall				Developmental Reading			
Academic Year	New Students[1]	Recommended		Rec. Students Who Enroll[2]		Recommended		Rec. Students Who Enroll[3]	
1990-91	664	n.a.		n.a.		51	7.7%	31	60.8%
1991-92	784	132	16.8%	99	75.0%	62	7.9%	35	56.5%
1992-93	860	151	17.6%	109	72.2%	62	7.2%	31	50.0%
1993-94	883	148	16.8%	95	64.2%	64	7.2%	34	53.1%
1994-95	803	107	13.3%	61	57.0%	33	4.1%	7	21.2%
1995-96	825	96	11.6%	55	57.3%	38	4.6%	12	31.6%
1996-97	993	142	14.3%	86	60.6%	58	5.8%	15	25.8%
1997-98	1057	132	12.5%	81	61.4%	45	4.3%	14	31.1%
1998-99	1212	302	24.9%	143	47.4%	276	22.8%	67	24.3%
1999-00	1091	323	29.6%	146	45.2%	283	25.9%	81	28.6%

[1] New students are students enrolling at Germanna for the first time during the academic year. The figures in this table vary slightly from those presented in the report "Student Outcomes in Developmental Education, 1994-95 through 1999-2000" due to different sources of placement testing data.

[2] Enrollment in developmental courses was not necessarily during the first academic year.

[3] Enrollment in developmental reading courses was not necessarily during the first academic year. Developmental reading courses include ENG 04, ENG 06, and ENG 07.

Table 2.
Enrollment in developmental reading courses, 1990-91 through 1999-2000

	ENG 04		ENG 06[1]		ENG 07[2]		Total	
Year	Sect.[3]	Count	Sect.	Count	Sect.	Count	Sect.	Count
1990-91	6	77	--	--	--	--	6	77
1991-92	5	64	--	--	--	--	5	64
1992-93	6	72	--	--	--	--	6	72
1993-94	7	72	--	--	--	--	7	72
1994-95	4	26	--	--	--	--	4	26
1995-96	3	25	--	--	--	--	3	25
1996-97	4	28	--	--	--	--	4	28
1997-98	5	37	--	--	--	--	5	37
1998-99	5	61	6	46			11	107
1999-00	7	84	4	55	2	19	13	158

[1] ENG 06 was first offered in Fall 1998.

[2] ENG 07 was first offered in Spring 2000.

[3] "Sect." is the number of sections offered; "Count" is a duplicated headcount over all three terms of the academic year. Students who withdrew from the class after the census date are included in these figures.

Table 3.
Course outcomes by developmental reading background[1], Students entering 1990-91 through 1999-2000
(Curriculum-placed students only)

Students first enrolling 1990-91 through 1997-98

Reading Placement	Developmental Course	Developmental Outcome	GPA in Soc Sci, Comm, Hum[2]		GPA in Math, Natural Science[3]		GPA in Occ/Tech[4]		Overall GPA[5]	
			Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
ENG 04	ENG 04	Complete	2.35	92	2.13	72	2.09	81	2.17	108
		Not Complete	1.60	18	1.07	7	0.70	14	1.02	27
	None	None	2.07	176	2.18	130	2.06	138	2.00	207
Unrestricted	None	None	2.59	3756	2.54	2873	2.56	2424	2.51	4261
No test scores	None	None	2.81	1342	2.81	998	2.91	1045	2.81	1792
All students[1]			2.62	5416	2.58	4105	2.62	3736	2.56	6444

Students first enrolling 1998-99 or 1999-2000

Reading Placement	Developmental Course	Developmental Outcome	GPA in Soc Sci, Comm, Hum		GPA in Math, Natural Science		GPA in Occ/Tech		Overall GPA	
			Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
ENG 04	ENG 04	Complete	1.38	13	1.25	6	1.63	14	1.43	22
		Not Complete	0.79	4	2.50	2	0.50	6	0.63	8
	None	None	2.21	49	2.56	30	1.70	34	1.98	57
ENG 06	ENG 06/07	Complete	2.54	28	2.17	10	2.00	17	2.29	31
		Not Complete	1.05	25	0.92	13	0.95	14	1.02	31
	None	None	2.04	238	2.05	126	2.06	166	1.99	300
Unrestricted	None	None	2.52	928	2.52	558	2.60	495	2.51	1064
No test scores	None	None	2.76	374	2.76	220	3.00	284	2.85	524
All students[1]			2.45	1692	2.47	982	2.51	1052	2.45	2078

Notes to Table 3:

[1] The table does not show all combinations of reading placement and developmental course enrollment. The figures for "all students" do include all curriculum-placed students.

[2] "GPA in Social Science, Communication, and Humanities" includes college-level courses with valid grades from the following disciplines: HIS, SOC, PSY, PHI, HUM, ECO, PLS, REL, ART, CHD, EDU, FRE, GEO, GER, MUS, SCM, SPA, SPD. Some of these courses may not require college-level reading skills. Not all students completed courses in these disciplines.

[3] "GPA in Math and Natural Science" includes college-level courses with valid grades from the following disciplines: MTH, GOL, HLT, NAS, NUR, PNE, BIO, CHM, ENV, PHY. Some of these courses may not require college-level reading skills. Not all students completed courses in these disciplines.

[4] "GPA in Occupational/Technical" includes college-level courses with valid grades from the following disciplines: ACC, ADJ, BUS, IST, TEL, ETR, LGL, MKT, AST, CIS, MEC. Some of these courses may not require college-level reading skills. Not all students completed courses in these disciplines.

[5] "Overall GPA" includes college-level courses with valid grades from the disciplines used in the previous three measures. STD courses are not included. Some of these courses may not require college-level reading skills. Not all students completed courses in these disciplines.

Table 4.
Course outcomes by developmental reading background (original and revised)[1]
Students entering 1990-91 through 1997-98
(Curriculum-placed students only)

Original Reading Placement	Revised Placement at 1998-99 cutoffs	Developmental Course	Developmental Outcome	GPA in Soc Sci, Comm, Hum		GPA in Math, Natural Science		GPA in Occ/Tech		Overall GPA	
				Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
ENG 04	Sub-ENG 04	ENG 04	Complete	2.47	3	2.22	3	1.73	4	1.82	4
			Not Complete	- -	0	- -	0	- -	0	- -	0
		None	None	1.27	6	2.30	4	1.40	7	0.94	9
ENG 04	ENG 04	ENG 04/06/07	Complete	2.34	89	2.13	69	2.12	78	2.19	105
			Not Complete	1.66	19	1.06	8	0.72	15	1.06	28
		None	None	2.10	170	2.17	126	2.09	131	2.05	198
Unrestricted	ENG 04	ENG 04/06/07	Complete	1.58	4	1.08	4	1.25	2	1.39	4
			Not Complete	1.67	1	1.00	1	- -	0	1.57	1
		None	None	2.04	69	2.05	45	1.95	55	1.89	88
Unrestricted	ENG 06	ENG 04/06/07	Complete	2.85	4	3.00	2	2.42	3	2.78	5
			Not Complete	1.48	2	3.00	2	1.00	2	1.63	2
		None	None	2.30	948	2.28	690	2.21	685	2.22	1090
Unrestricted	Unrestricted	None	None	2.70	2739	2.63	2143	2.72	1684	2.64	3083

[1] Table 4 presents only the placement categories which would have been different using the revised cutoff scores. See notes to Table 3 for explanation of table categories.